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- 1 Basil Glynn, *The Mummy on Screen: Orientalism and Monstrosity in Horror Cinema*.
- 2 Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. 216. ISBN: 9781350194830
- 3 Author: Rachel L. Carazo, University of Southern Mississippi & St. Thomas University

## **‘Unraveling’ the Cinematic History of the Mummy and ‘Bandaging’ its Marginalized Past**

- 4 Unwrapping mummies has sometimes been a task infused with problematic social implications, for these beings, the once-living, have caused many critics to urge scientists and historians to proceed with more respect. The same concept then carries over into Basil Glynn’s work, *The Mummy on Screen: Orientalism and Monstrosity in Horror Cinema*. According to Glynn, the Mummy,<sup>1</sup> often “unraveled” and treated by cinema and pop cultural critics with disdain or neglect, should now be reconsidered and rehabilitated as a media figure/“monster.” Glynn’s past publications, which have addressed media in different cultures and contexts, have provided him with an authoritative and unique insight into this topic of the on-screen Mummy, especially since mummies easily cross national borders – on screen and in the real world – and since they endure, despite their negative critical reception, in the public imagination. Moreover, by selecting a topic that is often marginalized, Glynn’s reinstatement of the Mummy’s value as a cultural symbol, as an Orientalized<sup>2</sup> object worthy of debate, and as a figure of differing levels of humanity – to which audiences readily respond – provides scholars with a template for reconsidering other disregarded themes and characters in the contemporary world.

- 5 The primary argument for Glynn is that the Mummy has been marginalized in cinematic and cultural scholarship due to many misconceptions about not only mummies as historical beings and movie “monsters,” but also about their history in the development of horror cinema. Thus, the trajectory of the book discusses how one can define a Mummy film (Chapter 1), the real-life history and evaluation of mummies through an Orientalist lens (Chapter 2), and the transformation of the Mummy from a romantic figure in literature and cinema to a horror figure (due to the backlash following the discovery of King Tut’s tomb in 1922) (Chapters 3 and 4). This commentary is complemented by detailed looks (in Chapter 5) at *The Mummy* (1932), the 1940s Mummy films made by Universal (Chapter 6) – which generated modern stereotypes of the bandaged and limping Mummy – and (in Chapter 7) *The Mummy* (1959): all these discussions emphasize Glynn’s points about why the Mummy no longer deserves to be marginalized. The book then ends (Chapter 8) with a brief review of contemporary iterations of the Mummy as well as future possibilities for research, of which the gendered analysis appears particularly fruitful.
- 6 Yet the details and multifaceted support that Glynn uses to highlight how the Mummy has been marginalized over time in cinema and pop culture serve as the most useful and enlightening aspects of the work. Specifically, by focusing on the Mummy, Glynn overcomes the tendency to merely hatch studies of the Mummy in works about directors, studios, and monsters in general, all of which overshadow the Mummy as a figure in its own right. Then, Glynn argues that not having an “actor or actress [...] become truly synonymous with the figure” (5) and not having an original Ur-text “deriving from folklore” (8) have actually been *benefits* for the different representations of the Mummy that have developed over time, allowing for recognizable tropes to appear without requiring subsequent Mummy iterations to be bound to them.
- 7 Moreover, even the “repetitious” Mummy aspects that often appear in film have an innovative function: as Glynn emphasizes, “the Mummy has offered a miscellany of monstrous possibilities” (2) that allow for boundary-crossing and original *reuses* of Mummy elements, thus making it just as flexible of a cinematic figure as Dracula or Frankenstein’s Creature. Glynn’s inclusion of gender and sexuality in regard to the Mummy also highlights the Mummy’s emerging versatility. Even though critics demote the horror of the Mummy because it tends to have a “sexuality [that] is eternally repressed” (11), there are examples in which the romantic nature of the Mummy is more passionate and palpable than the feelings of humans; there are even instances in which the Mummy “gets the girl,” thus complicating the image of the Mummy as boring and incapable of subverting representations of contemporary social norms.
- 8 The strength, then, of Glynn’s argument is that it comprises historical debates about real-life mummies, discussions involving their cinematic “progeny,” and even the Mummy in the context of horror and “monster” (i.e., Dracula, the Wolfman) tropes, bringing in transdisciplinary elements that support his claims from multiple perspectives. However, the one caveat – which this reviewer would not necessarily deem a weakness, but rather a realistic choice to allow for a cohesive structure of the book – is that the elements involving Orientalism in regard to the Mummy are interwoven into each chapter without appearing in a more comprehensive, summative chapter at the end, which sometimes appear in other works on Orientalism and which would have offered another way to emphasize Glynn’s final arguments. Nevertheless, the interlacing of comments concerning Orientalism and the Mummy alongside

discussions of specific films (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) do still support the exploration of Orientalism in the work: those scholars more interested in Orientalism will simply need to sift through the particular examples and take note of them as they read.

- 9 Glynn's critical mention that the discovery of King Tut's tomb did not begin "Mummy Mania" in cinema, as is commonly believed, but rather altered the course of Mummy texts that had already been popular remains an integral revelation from the book. Finally, Glynn's critique of scholarly lenses used toward the Mummy, stating "[i]t is therefore fruitless to apply criteria to the Mummy that apply to other classic monsters in a one-size-fits-all approach" (14), provides the required impetus to push scholars of "monster" movies, horror as a genre, or cinema in general in a different – more open-minded and multifocal – direction.
- 10 Therefore, Glynn's work can be deemed a well-written, strongly supported, and quite entertaining read for, despite the static nature of the stereotypical Mummy in the public's perception, unraveling the arguments that Glynn makes allows, for once, for a *safe* removal of the Mummy from the tomb of critical abandonment and contempt in which it has lain for so long. Just like the Mummy is multilayered by bandages, Glynn offers readers enticing, unwinding pieces of evidence of how and why the Mummy should continue to endure in the pop cultural and scholarly imagination.

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## NOTES

1. Glynn capitalizes Mummy to distinguish it as a cinematic and pop cultural trope from real-life mummies or other usages of "mummy" that do not refer to this phenomenon.
2. Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.